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MENDOTA

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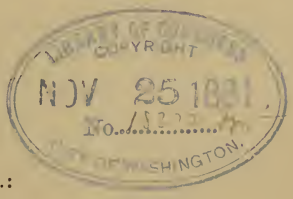
MENDOTA,

THE

SPIRIT OF THE LAKE.

BY

MAJOR CHAS. G. MAYERS.



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To GEN. GEO. P. DELAPLAINE,

My highly esteemed and oldest friend in the country, between whom and myself, for thirty years, friendship has been uninterrupted and without a cloud, I respectfully dedicate this work.

Chas. G. Mayers.

Madison, Wis., Oct. 14, 1881.

PREFACE.

A residence in Madison of nearly thirty-five years, on the shores of one or other of our beautiful Lakes, has endeared them to me. I love them in all their changeful moods, and cannot leave them. No matter whether in early Spring they hurl their waves upon the shores in thunder tones, crushing to atoms the ice fetters that have so long held them prisoner, or lay calm and placid as a grand and gorgeously framed mirror; whether I view them when they reflect the rays of a midsummer sun, or idly play with a flood of moonbeams, they are always charming. I have long wished to collect something of the dim myths and suggestions of legends connected with the Lakes, and in idle hours have strung together rhymes concerninig them. Yielding to the request of a few partial friends, I now give one of them to the public, and shall be governed by its verdict in determining whether I am worthy to complete the Songs of the Lakes.

THE AUTHOR.

MENDOTA.

DO you know the mossy headland,
With its em'rald hued corona,
Throwing shadows deep into the
Bosom of the lake Monona?
Just behind it lies the garden,
Wond'rous in its wild-wood glory!
Need we marvel that the Red Man
Told its fame in many a story?
For its beauty has few rivals,
Either 'mid the gems of nature,
Or where art, on nature's landscape,
Deftly touches every feature.
'Tis no wonder they forsook it
Slowly, turning ling'ring glances
To their lost, their lovely garden,
Scene of all their feasts and dances.

Faint around us grow the traces
Of the Indian, like the dying
Autumn day-light, or the rushing
Night sound of the wild birds flying;
Still, the summers bring some scion
Of the forest, singly straying,
Silently, amid the shadows
Both of woods and race decaying!
Ah, those native forest children
Recked not of the hidden story
Of a race that, ere their coming,
Was already old and hoary!
Not to them had e'er been whispered
From the green mounds, undulating
O'er their garden, aught of people
Their traditions all pre-dating.
Long lost story, e'er the nations
That remotest hist'ry traces
Had a being, which our fancy
'Mong forgotten ages places.

Seated in the wild plum orchard,
Where in Spring the air is scented
By the perfume from the blossoms,
Wafted with a wealth unstinted,
Three young Indian boys were talking
Of their father's skill and daring;

Each one rivaling the other,
When his sire's renown comparing:
One was named "The Loon" the "Screamer."
Nameless yet remained another,
Save "The son of the Canoe Man."
Young Mendota was the other.
One was boasting of the scalp locks
That his father's hand had taken;
Telling of him in the war-dance;
How his whoop the forests waken;
"He had crossed the mighty river;
With the warlike Sioux had striven;
'Round the painted post, when dancing,
Deepest had his axe been driven."
Another boasted of his father
As most skillful on the water:
"Like an arrow fled the birch-bark,
When her flight his paddle taught her.
Who but he, the dancing shallop,
Through the white-caps could send flying
Faster than retreating foemen,
Who for life the stroke were plying?
Were it not that 'Arm that sweepeth'
Made the boat fly like the swallow,
Some, whose scalps your father mastered,
Still would chase and war-path follow!

See, Mendota still is chipping —
Caring naught, nor aught replying —
Chipping still, the long sun journey,
Boy, to be a warrior trying!
We of hick'ry make our arrows —
Make them strong and heavy headed;
But Mendota, would be hunter,
Using shaft by panther dreaded."
Sprang Mendota from the earth mound.
Upright stood a young Adonis! —
Purest type of manly beauty
That to art or nature known is! —
Looking 'round among his comrades,
With the pride that knows not failing,
Quietly, but firmly, answered
Those his ears had been assailing:
"All your blunt and harmless arrows
Scarce the deer would scare from feeding;
If with this I fairly strike him,
I can track him by the bleeding.
And *you* boast your father's honors!
Scalp-locks won by stealth in fighting;
Stealing, cat-like, on unguarded
Foeman, not a cover slighting;
When a conquered chief lay dreading
Of his scalp bereft to perish!

Then *my* father scorned to rob him
Of the prize that warriors cherish!
Those around him stood and questioned,
Why for fame so little caring?
'On the happy hunt,' he answered,
'Let him go, his honors wearing!'
True, your father sweeps the paddle,
Best and strongest of the nation;
Victor crowned in every contest,
Cause for all your exhultation;
But *my* father wears the bear claws —
Claws of savage bear, that yielded
Life and trophies to the death-stroke,
From the tomahawk he wielded!
And the panther's skin I carry,
Tells of hunter strong and fearless!
Armed with knife alone, he tore it
From the beast in forest peerless!
Down he threw the bloody trophy,
Smiling as successful hunter,
Naught of pain — though sorely wounded —
Talked, but of the fierce encounter.
All our braves are on the war-path:
Some will come, and some, lie sleeping
'Neath the green and crimson carpet,
Crimsoned, by their death wounds weeping!

After nearly two moons' labor,
  See, my arrow is completed,
I will leave yon with the women,
  Or around the camp-fire seated,
I will go into the forest,
  And, my hunter's life beginning,
Learn some secret that will aid me
  To the name of hunter winning!

Straight he turned his back upon them,
  Heeding neither laugh nor jeering,
With his bow and single arrow,
  In the forest disappearing.
High, the boy's heart beat within him,
  With the consciousness of going
On his first essay of manhood;
  Full of youthful ardor glowing!
Nothing but his robe of panther,
  O'er his shoulder thrown, he carried,
Serving both for couch and raiment,
  In the forest while he tarried —
Save the moccasin of buckskin,
  Neatly fashioned, quill'd and beaded,
And a knife by thong suspended —
  All equipment that he needed;
Through the forest slowly wending,
  Grace in every limb and feature!

Beauty, to its beauty adding,
Nature's child alone with nature!
Thus he wandered, thoughtful, musing,
Of the morrow ever thinking;
Till he reached the rocky headland,
As the sun was grandly sinking;
Throwing o'er the lake Mendota,
Such a flood of golden grandeur,
That both eye and tongue were spell-bound,
By the exquisite expandure!
Sun, and sky, and lake, commingle
Color in such rich profusion,
That the heart seeks voice, entreating
Fitting words for its effusion!
Massive color, bold in outline,
Fading into blended glory,
Telling to enraptured gazers,
Beauty's most bewitching story!
And Mendota gazed in wonder,
All his soul, the scene entrancing;
Like the chiseled statue, standing
Motionless, an arm advancing;
Thus he stood, until the rival
Pink and pearl and purple, blending,
Softened into light blue ether,
Solemnly the sun-set ending;

Then he turned, as one awaking
From a dream, reluctant, sighing,
Loth to leave the living picture,
All comparison defying!
Ate of what the lake and forest
Freely gave,— the meed of labor,
Spread his panther-skin and slumbered,
Reckless what might be his neighbor.

The east had scarcely caught the tinting
Of the first grey dawn of morning,
When he sprang, refreshed, from slumber;
Donned the panther's rude adorning;
No more careless was his bearing,
But, while listening acutely,
Restless flashed his eyes like meteors,
Traveling swiftly, softly, mutely;
Not a chirp of bird, or murmur
Of the woods, but well was noted;
To the chase, the youthful hunter,
Every energy devoted!
Thus he sped, until he halted
By the winding broad Yahara! —
In the east, the sun, arising,
Threw aloft his red tiara —
Stealing cat-like, through the bushes,
To the water's edge advancing,

Keenly listening for the breaking
Of the forest silence,— glancing
Quickly at each sign of nature,
Ah! why do the branches quiver
Just beyond the hillock rising
At the sharp bend of the river?

Scarce the air can hear his movements,
Though his steps are nearly flying,
Till the gentle breath of morning,
From the spot, toward him, is sighing;
Then, while creeping nimbly forward,
Nature's stillness yet unbroken!
Not a taint, or sound of warning,
Of his presence giving token,
Till within an easy bow-shot,
He perceives, in quiet, feeding,
Three good deer! unconscious, careless,
His approach unknown, unheeding!

One brave stag with branching antlers,
Shook his crest, and bid defiance
To the forest! he, the monarch,
Seemed to stand in self reliance!
And the boy's heart madly bounded;
But his nerves were all unshaken,
As to head, he drew the arrow!
Having each precaution taken —

Twice, he tried, if sure and steady,
He could aim behind the shoulder,
But the intervening brush-wood,
Made him choose a method bolder,
Rose erect, like silent shadow,
Every nerve his pressure tightening,
And before the stag had seen him,
Sped the fatal shaft like lightning!
Then, by instinct, he embodied
The antique, the great Apollo!
Form of beauty, standing rigid;
Sight and soul, the arrow follow!
Right arm gracefully withdrawing,
Still his left, the bow extending,
On the flying arrow's fortune,
Every faculty is bending!

But a moment stands the statue
Breathless, most intently watching!
E'er the boy's heart leaps to manhood,
All the hunter's ardor catching!
One brave bound, the stag attempted,
Then stood still; except the shivering
Of the death stroke, for the arrow,
Deep sunk in his flesh, was quivering!
E'er the stag had time to rally,
Recklessly the hunter darted

On him, and with knife deep driven,
Life's sustaining current parted!
Then he stood, intently watching,
Where the gasping and the sighing,
Of the fallen forest monarch,
Told the noble stag was dying!
And his heart was touched to sadness,
By the piteous glance, appealing!
For an eye of matchless beauty,
More than instinct, seemed revealing.
But the hunter's labors claimed him,
He, the deer must skin and quarter,
And upon the saplings hang it —
Young trees, mirrored by the water —
Thus he toiled until the mid-day
Sun shone on his labor finished;
And upon a boy's exultant
Satisfaction undiminished;
With one ling'ring glance of pleasure
At the young trees graceful bending
'Neath their burden, to the garden,
Soon his nimble steps were tending.

Quietly, into the village
Walked Mendota, quite suppressing
Every look of triumph, waiting
Comrade's questioning and guessing;

First, "The Screaming Loon" assailed him —
Son of him the scalp-locks wearing —
Gave to him a mocking welcome,
Mimicking his stoic bearing;
Called aloud unto the women,
"Ho you there, the deer are plenty
In the forest, you may hunt them,
For Mendota's hands are empty!"
Silent stood the youthful hunter,
Scarce a lip's contemptuous curling;
But the pliant panther mantle
Round his form in triumph furling,
Till the son of "Arm that Sweepeth"
Said, "Where has my brother tarried?
Bloody, is the flint-tipped arrow
You into the forest carried!"

Like the sun, on sudden bursting
Through the clouds the earth oppressing,
Lit Mendota's eye, in triumph;
And the thought his mind possessing —
Though it compensated taunting —
Burst its bonds, and but addressing
Him who had the arrow noted —
While unseemly boast suppressing —
Told him all about his hunting,
Where he slept, and lastly told him

Of the triumph that had crowned him!
What a picture to behold him,
As with boyish heart ennobled
By the thought of how unmeasured
E'en by young ambition's vision,
Was the victory he treasured!
"Oh my brother, had you seen him
As the morning's breath he greeted,
Nobler stag than e'er a hunter
With a single shaft defeated!
You, with me, will take the birch-bark,
We can paddle like our fathers,
It is light, and dry, and dancing,
And the roughest sea it weathers;
I have left my prize in safety;
In the saplings I have swung it
Out of danger; 'mong the branches
Bending o'er the water, hung it."

Lightly glanced the birchen vessel
O'er Monona, from the agile
Paddling of the eager rowers
Swiftly, flew a bark so fragile;
Soon Monona lay behind them,
And Yahara then ascending
'Gainst the current, far more slowly
Traced the boat the river's wending;

Till at length the bending willows
Meeting midway, as if hiding
Where Mendota found an outlet,
Yielded to the birch-bark's gliding.
And the broad lake spread before them,
Rich again in sun-set glory!
Speaking to admiring senses,
Grand, but silent, oratory!
Both, by impulse, paused and floated,
Gazing on the grand combining
Of the mass of living colors
Blended o'er the sun's declining!

Not a breath, the water ruffled,
Almost mirror-like, it slumbered,
When the boys resumed their paddles,
'Twas with strokes more slowly numbered;
Thus, partaking of the spirit
Of the glorious, quiet, even',
Scarce their boat disturbed the water,
From the slight impetus given,
Still they paused not, but yet floating
With a stroke so light and wary,
Undisturbed, they passed the wild duck,
On the lake's great tributary.
Silence on the river rested,
Not a breath the air disturbing,

For the night had spread her mantle,
All the evening tints absorbing!
Still they held their course unerring,
'Till, the wooded hillock reaching,
They prepared to rest till morning,
Carefully their light boat beaching;
Then, these children of the forest,
Nature taught, in all resources,
Made repast and sank to slumber;
Like the child, the mother nurses!

Morn, had scarcely in the Orient,
Shown the night its russet banner,
'Ere the boys arose from slumber,
And in gleeful, boyish manner,
Laughed, and called unto the day-break:
"That the sun, his chariot's eager
Coursers, might urge on more quickly!
For the light was yet too meager;"
Ah, the grey is growing brighter,
As the night rolls up her sable,
To discern the quarry, hanging
Safely, soon the boys were able!
"Look now, where the branching antlers
Yonder white-oak limbs are bending!
Branch of tree and antlers branching,
See, the morning grey is blending!"

Mute in wonder stood his comrade!
All the story he had told them
Was surpassed; 'twere worth the journey,
Thus suspended to behold them!

Hard they labored, till the light boat
With the precious freight was loaded;
Into mid-stream, then they darted,
Like a steed whose flanks are goaded!
Scarce the sun had left the tree tops,
When Monona lay before them;
On the prow, they placed the antlers,
Honoring the bark that bore them!
Soon, with steady, measured effort,
Midway in the lake, they floated,
Asking, by their eager glances,
If they must return unnoted?
Quick, the son of "Arm that sweepeth"
Said, "Mendota, hist! look yonder!
Those are not the women only,
Down the wooded banks who wander?"
Quite erect, the boy had risen,
'Gainst the wale on paddle leaning,
Eagle-like, his vision reaching
O'er the water intervening!
Then he answered, "Brother hunter,
Neither squaws nor papoose meet us;

Home returned are all our warriors,
And they line the shore to greet us!"
'Ere again his paddle dipping,
One shrill whoop, the lake resounded!
Like the swallow, o'er the water,
Then, the airy shallop bounded!

Short the space, till 'neath the garden,
They have landed with their treasure;
Mute, are all the dusky warriors,
But their eyes the antlers measure!
For no hunter of the nation,
Such a conquest ever boasted!
Such a pair of branching antlers,
Over lodge had ne'er been posted!
Almost irksome, was their silence
To the youth, who hoped for praises
And approval of his efforts;
But his deed the tribe amazes!
Till his father, noted, lying
In the boat, the blood stained arrow!
And from out his sheath he drew one,
Tipped with flint head, sharp and narrow!
In the boat, beside the other,
Quietly he stepped and laid it,
Saying, "Boy, when next you need it,
Here's a second one to aid it!"

Quick as thought the impulse seized them;
Many braves their best selected,
Into the canoe they tossed them,
Till there lay a store collected,
Of such arrows, that their owner
Might a chieftain's envy kindle!
Some were strong, and heavy pointed,
Others, slender as a windle.

He, whose totem was an oak tree
By the lightning rudely riven!
Called the boy to stand before him,
Pointed to the arrows given,
Then — as chief of all the Nation
Turned around, his arm extending,
Claiming audience of his warriors,—
Royal tone and gesture, blending,—
Told them, "Though returning victors
From the war-path, all the chaunting
Of their deeds would be outnumbered,
By the song of this boy's hunting."
Then, unto the young, appealing,—
Who preserved respectful station—
Pointed to the youth Mendota,
As the hope of all the Nation.

High above them in the garden,
Shrill, the women's voices sounded.

When he heard his mother call him
Nimbly up the bank he bounded;
Here, it was no longer needful,
That the stoic, quiet bearing
Of the Indian, should restrain him,—
Nothing for appearance caring —
Straight he ran to meet his mother;
She, her arms about him twining,
Lavished on him fond endearments,
In those tones of tender whining,
Sounding sweetly by her uttered —
Breathing love and pride commingled;
Sometimes, like the notes of tinkling
Bells of silver, lightly jingled.
Listening kindly — softly laughing —
To the pleasant, rippling murmur;
In his eye, the light of loving,
Glowed with ardent warmth of summer!
Answering gently her caresses,
Answering thus, her benison,
"When our braves are gone, my mother,
I can bring you venison."

And Mendota lived and hunted,
Chief beloved, until the coming
Of the tide of tireless workmen,—
Sung of in the brown bee's humming —

Swept the country, and the hunter,
Spent the day the deer in tracking,
But to see it wrested from him,
At the deadly rifle's cracking!
Then, the hatchet they unburied;
Long and far, the war-path treading;
For the white man's friendship fighting,
Brother's blood for stranger shedding!
But at length the wingéd arrow
With the death the fates had written
For Mendota, found his bosom,
And to earth the chief was smitten!
"Bear me homeward," said Mendota;
"To the lake of sun-sets bear me;
In my boat, upon the water,
For the happy hunt prepare me."
Home they bore the wounded chieftain;
Not a listening ear could note a
Sound, as in his boat he drifted,
On the bosom of Mendota!
In the ev'ning, when the western
Sky gleamed like a searing cauter,
The CHIEF upon the LAKE Mendota,
Gave his spirit to the water.

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